Incomprehensibility

Sir, – In his review of my book The Anti-Journalist (August 6), Edward Timms describes my conclusion as being “curiously dismissive” in its treatment of Karl Kraus, the subject of the book. This strikes me as strange, as does Timms’s suggestion that my “emphasis” is “on ‘Kraus’s relatively minor cultural standing’”. For what I tried to do was not so much stress that standing as explain it. And I said that it needs explaining precisely because of the obvious, often noted relevance of Kraus’s brilliant media criticism to our own media saturated moment. Moreover, the answer I gave focuses on the “radical character” of Kraus’s modernism, as well as the “success of his project as an anti-journalist”, rather than any failure on his part. My point was – and is – as follows. A cultural journalist who despised cultural journalism, Kraus operated in a medium that, in his view, had made literary language exchangeable and consumable to an extreme degree.
Accordingly, he took extreme formal steps to make his own writing resistant to such appropriation, producing what frequently amounts to a hermetic anti journalism. If Kraus campaigned against sloppy and pretentious opacity in the press, he also, as Gershom Scholem once put it, “fought for incomprehensibility”. Perhaps more than anything else, it is his victories here that cost him readers.

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